

DETECTIVE FICTION

AND THE AFRICAN SCENE:

*From the "Whodunit?" to the
"Whydunit?"*



LINUS ASONG

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Detective Fiction & The African Scene: From The “Whodunit?” To The “Whydunit?”

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Introduction

With only a few dissenting voices, it has now become an incontestable fact of literary history that the detective novel in all its ramifications ... Thrillers, Spy, Crime and Mystery Novels... belongs to an inferior class of literature. Arthur G. Kennedy and Donald B. Sands (1960:61), to mention only one of several common cases, classify it under the section “Types and Sub literary Species,” in their work: *A Concise Bibliography for Students of English*. As R. Austin Freeman (1946:13-14), aptly summarises “it is dismissed contemptuously as outside the pale of literature..., a type of work produced by half-educated and wholly incompetent writers for the consumption by office boys, factory girls, and other persons devoid of culture and literary taste.” Edmund Wilson (1950: 234), one of the most uncompromising critics of the genre had practically the same disdain for every work that came under the label of detective fiction, the reputation of the writer in other literary circles notwithstanding. He declares (rather vehemently, perhaps) that:

you cannot read such a book, you run through it to see the problem worked out; and you cannot become interested in the characters because they never can be allowed an existence of their own even in a flat two dimensions but have always to be contrived so that they can seem either reliable or sinister, depending on which quarter, at the moment, is to be baited for the reader’s suspicion.

He is convinced that as a department of imaginative writing, the genre is completely dead.

Chapter I

The State of the Genre

Popular Misconceptions, Sources of Error in Judgment

“Critics, the makers and breakers of men of letters,” says N. J. Tremblay (1954: 217), “are always wary of mass production and the esteem of the multitude; this, they judge, smacks of a certain cheapness.” True to fact, judged by sheer output alone, the rate of production of writers of detective fiction gives sufficient cause for doubts as to the precise quality of the products. During a lifetime of eighty-six years, Agatha Christie produced well over a hundred novels, dozens of which have been made into movies, not counting her numerous short stories and a few plays. In France, George Simenon is now known to have published about three hundred and fifty full-length works of fiction, many of which have been translated into twenty different languages, forty motion pictures have been made from them, and, as Tremblay (1954: 242) points out, each day, somewhere around the world, his stories are heard on the radio. It is further said of his talents that he would write a “whodunit” in a month and a straight novel in three months. In America, Erle Stanley Gardner has achieved just as much greatness and popularity. Between the publication of his first Perry Mason novel, *The Case of the Velvet Claws* (1933), and the last, *The Case of the Postponed Murder* (1973), he is known to have produced well over a hundred novels, several of which have been made into crowd-pulling movies.

These novels, in all conscience, cannot be reasonably said to be the exclusive monopoly of the masses, or the uncultured. Among their most avid consumers are always to be mentioned heads of states of great renown such as Woodrow Wilson and J.F. Kennedy; and in the literary sphere, they include such highly respected figures as W.B.

Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and André Gide. To these can also be added other personages which Charles Rolo says include college presidents, renowned generals and scientific geniuses. The mention of André Gide is particularly important in the study of the changing fortunes of the genre, for it was he who, as Tremblay (1954: 217) says, helped “rescue Simenon from the limbo of relative literary insignificance to which he seemed relegated.” He wrote down in his *Journal* (1954:319):

“... (je) viens de dévorer d'affilée huit livres de Simenon à raison d'un par jour (en seconde lecture pour long cours, *Les Inconnus dans la Maison et Le Pendu de Saint-Pholien*).”

In January 1948 he again noted down:

“*Nouvelle plongée dans Simenon; je viens d'en relire six d'affilée.*”

One cannot press the point so far as to insist that there is, or there ought to exist a direct and immutable ratio between literary merit and phenomenal popularity, or between prolificacy and literary excellence. But to ignore the fact is to ignore a fundamental element in Literary Evaluation. “Copious productivity,” says J.W. Kruth (1985:230), “has often been one of the most striking characteristics of the great writers of fiction.” This is a literary fact because it is this factor *inter alia* which constitutes the basis for assigning to Charles Dickens, Lope de Vega, Goethe, Honoré de Balzac and Anthony Trollope, the positions of such eminence which they occupy in the world of fiction to this day.

For some critics, the genre of detective fiction is nothing more than an endlessly reduplicated form, employing sterile formulas, stock characters, and innumerable clichés of method and construction a hackneyed and formula-ridden fiction devoid of sensation and titillation. An assertion of this nature seems to reflect not so much the shallowness of the quality of the work under scrutiny as that of

the mind of the reader or critic who deliberately chooses to examine the work from that particular angle alone. For one thing, *formulaic* literature as a literary phenomenon, did not enter discourse with the publication in April, 1841 of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" which connoisseurs of the genre regard as the precise beginning of the detective story. Such labels as the Gothic Novel, The Classical Epic, The Petrarchan Sonnet, Restoration Comedy, The Romance, and the like, are all too familiar to students of literature, as formulas or literary conventions which the writers under the various labels followed almost as closely as the writers of detective fiction. Once again, J. W. Krutch's observation (1976:282) is of particular interest, that:

no inconsiderable part of the great literature of the world has been written within the limitations of an established tradition, and so written not because the authors lacked originality but because the acceptance of a tradition with fixed themes and methods seems to release rather than stifle the effective working of the imagination.

That its formulaic nature should loom so highly in the evaluation of the detective novel is symptomatic of the amount of fault-finding that has always pervaded criticism of the genre. John G. Gawelti has also made it clear that without some form of standardization, artistic communication would be virtually impossible because conventions, by their very nature, establish a common ground between writers and audiences.

Additionally, to blame the genre's lack of esteem on its subject-matter - Crime and Investigation - which the *littérateurs* think not serious enough to be of any value, is again to bow more to literary prejudice than fact. Whichever way Crime and Investigation are to be considered by the fastidious world of letters, the fact cannot be forgotten or ignored that they have always been at the core of some of the world's greatest masterpieces. *Oedipus Tyrannus* which S.T. Coleridge praised (along with Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* and Henry

Fielding's *Tom Jones*), as one of the most perfect plots ever planned, could be taken in a very important sense as a murder mystery. Briefly, it is the story of how, having won his crown by solving the riddle of the murderous Sphinx, Oedipus sets out with the unrelenting curiosity and ruthless honesty of all detectives worthy of the title, to examine rumours, question witnesses and finally discover the man who had killed king Laius.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, usually lauded for its dramatic and intellectual complexity, is basically a tale of crime and detection. It tells the story of how the very intelligent and ratiocinating Prince of Denmark goes about discovering the real truth about the death of his father, and of the consequences arising therefrom.

Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* would lose much of its force if we were to succeed in extracting the murder of Feodor Pavlovich and the wrongful conviction of Dmitri from the main story-line. In like manner, the impact of the story of *Crime and Punishment* seems to hinge principally on and emanate from Porfiry's attempts to track down the murderer of the old pawnbroker. These two novels also have constantly been praised, and with much justification, for the degree of their psychological and ideological complexity and intensity; but in either case it is the crime and investigation that fastens the reader's attention to the substance of the story. In the murder of the old pawnbroker and her daughter one even hears a rather loud echo of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," where the old lady, Madame, L'Espanaye and her daughter are most brutally murdered.

From the point of view of subject-matter, therefore, insofar as murder and investigation are concerned, the detective novel does not deserve as much condemnation as has been continuously heaped upon it. Here, we are, of course, referring only to the best, the very best, that the genre has to offer; while bearing firmly in mind the truth underlying Raymond Chandler's remark that "good specimens of the art are much rarer than good novels," and that "rather second-

rate items outlast most of the high velocity fiction, and a great many that should never have been born simply refuse to die.”

Because of that special distinction of being a universal literature, one of the literary forms that bridge with complete success the gap between the two worlds, rich and poor, elite and the masses, highbrow and lowbrow; because also of its resemblance in subject-matter to great literature, investigation of detective fiction must not be looked at as a mere examination of sub-literature. It must, instead be understood as an investigation into a wronged genre, a viable literary genre which has been frequently dismissed without being given fair trial.

The Practitioners

In my view, the absence of respect for the detective novel cannot be explained simply by pointing an accusing finger at the quality of the works alone or to the attitude which the reader brings to his reading and evaluation. It is the sum total of several apparently insignificant factors which are often overlooked or exaggerated by its advocates, detractors and practitioners alike.

Fundamental to the perennial degradation of the genre lies the rather apologetic and even perfunctory attitude of accomplished practitioners of the art. To fully grasp the gravity of the situation we could quite briefly examine some contributions that artists have made elsewhere, to salvage the reputation of a threatened art. When T.S. Eliot first published *The Waste Land* in 1921, it was greeted with open ridicule and outright condemnation, except perhaps by a handful of faithful friends like Ezra Pound. Amy Lowell (1968:5) declared flatly: “I think it is a piece of tripe.” Louis Untermeyer (1965:11) said “it is doubtful whether *The Waste Land* is anything but a set of separate poems, a piece of literary carpentry, a scholarly joiner’s work, the flotsam and jetsam of desiccated culture.” He went on to conclude

that it was “a pompous parade of erudition.” And with this and numerous other vicious attacks, the poem would have gone the way of all flesh.

But T.S. Eliot refused to capitulate. “In *The Waste Land* I wasn’t even bothering whether I understood what I was saying,” he had the effrontery of admitting in a public interview (1960:8). And even if he bothered about understanding what he was writing, he was always quick to convert his ignorance into philosophy. He said:

If you complain that a poet is obscure, and apparently ignoring you, the reader, or that he is speaking only to a limited circle of initiates from which you are excluded – remember that what he may have been trying to do, was to put something into words which could not be said in any other way, and therefore in a language which may be worth the trouble of learning

And soon after the publication of the poem Eliot had proceeded to rally behind him an entire generation that now goes under the name of the “new critics,” a group that received even greater scorn than Eliot’s poem itself ever got. Robert Hillyer’s (1969:41) incisive observation on this point, one which I feel strongly inclined to agree with, is worthy of note:

The party line of Eliot and the new esthetes (including the self-styled “new critics”) is merely the old doctrine of art-for-art’s sake titivated with plumes of voodoo jargon to overawe the young...Their current preoccupation is a vocabulary that has no purpose but its own creation.... They assume a superiority which cannot be attacked because it has no substance. To the world eager for the clearest vision of poets they offer only the analysis of disillusioned irony, word by word.

Yet, in spite of this atmosphere of unrestrained derision, *The Waste Land* and the “new critics” have come to stay. This poem has now become the very frame of reference for the modern trend in

poetry. Jay Martin (1972:11), to quote only one of scores of critics who quickly joined the band wagon, was able to say that “the poem is, first of all, an experiment with which one may be able to talk about the world, and so, by talking, order it.”

In the province of the detective novel, the response of the masters has not helped the genre at all. Norman Shrapnel (1960:1) expressed a very crucial fact when he mentioned rather casually in his work that “the rot started when good writers in the medium themselves began to apologise for it.” The whole problem of inferiority of the genre may very well have stemmed from the realization by suspicious critics that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the unforgettable Sherlock Holmes, had an extremely low opinion of his achievement in that direction. In his *Memories and Adventures* (1924), he gave the world of letters the one excuse it might have needed when he said “I believe that had I never touched Holmes, who has tended to obscure my higher work, my position in literature would have been a more commanding one.” By saying “my higher work,” he was most certainly referring to the historical novels and texts about the supernatural on which he had squandered a good half of his energies. What he was unwilling or incapable of facing was the fact that, in writing the Sherlock Holmes stories, he had embarked on a species of literature not inferior to, but merely different from the historical novel, and therefore just as capable of launching him on the road to literary greatness. Again, either he forgot or was incapable of facing the fact that an artist is always the product of his time, and that even in the detective novel, the spirit of the age is bound to be reflected, however obliquely. William Ayelotte (1985:69), whom I find partial to this view, has put the matter quite succinctly in these terms:

The interest of detective novels to the historian is that they shed light on the people who read them. By studying the fantasies contained in this literature, one may gather a description of its readers, in terms of their unsatisfied motivational drives. Thus these books are the more illumination

the more unrealistic and the more inaccurate they are. It is precisely by their inaccuracies that they reveal attitudes and emotions of the audience to which they cater.

The attitude of Georges Simenon too has not been very inspiring, notwithstanding the fact that he was once mentioned as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Detective fiction, he is known to have made clear, was not his province. His *grand design* had always been to produce the quintessential novel – *le roman pur*, he called it – which should do for his own age what the Greek dramatists did with tragedy in their era. The murder mystery to which he added an immense dimension, fascinated him only because it offered an opportunity to probe into man's destiny, and because the detective would serve as an explanatory prop akin to the chorus in Greek tragedy.

It is now proved beyond reasonable doubts that William Faulkner must have had a keen affection for detective stories. This is not just because, as D. L Sayers (1970:228) says, "there are few good living writers who have not tried their hand at it at one time or another." At his death in 1962, over twenty-five sketches he had made in the genre were discovered on his shelves. Mick Gidley has pointed out too that in the compilation of *William Faulkner's Library – A Catalogue*, prominent crime writers like John Dickson Carr, Dashiell Hammet, Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie and George Simenon provided items for entry. But when asked at an interview whether he ever read detective stories, he is said to have hesitated for a while and then, probably with a consciousness of the very low reputation of the genre, said "I read Simenon because he reminds me something of Chekov."

Faulkner's place in American and consequently world literature is secure, but it rests partly on a genre and an influence he would not dare admit in public. All the five stories in his collection of *Knights Gambit* are actually detective stories. Among his longer fiction, *Sanctuary* can be called a crime novel in which Horace Benbow plays

the roles of the detective; *Intruder in the Dust* is also a mystery novel in very many senses of the word, and *Absalom! Absalom!* is constructed, as is *Light in August*, in such a way that the detective elements constitute a rallying point for the various themes that are developed throughout the two books. In my view, therefore, a dubious attitude of the sort exhibited by William Faulkner in public has done more damage to the reputation of the genre than even its bastardization at the hands of incompetent practitioners.

The detective novel's reputation is made even more precarious when its writers attempt to speak "honesty" about it. In her introduction to the first *Omnibus of Crime*, Miss Dorothy L. Sayers wrote that the detective novel does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement. We can only feel the real weight of such a comment when we remember that she herself, an author and creator of the famous Lord Peter Wimsey, has been described by many as the most distinguished living exponent of her art, to an audience of detective story readers.

Isaac Newton is often quoted as having paid his debt to his predecessors in the memorable words: "If I have been found to see farther than everybody else, it is because I stood on the shoulders of giants." Not so the detective fiction writers, who have constantly treated each other with unusual scorn. The stage for this mutual contempt seems to me to have been expressed as early as *A Study in Scarlet*,² Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's first attempt at a full-length work of fiction based on crime and investigation. In that novel (1962:24) Sherlock Holmes tells Doctor Watson:

Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friends' thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour's silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine.

Holmes is definitely referring here to C. Auguste Dupin, the prototypical detective of the genre, the character after whom he, Holmes, had been very consciously created. It is not quite safe to take a writer to task for the comments of his creation, but it stands to reason that if Conan Doyle was not self-conscious of his improvement on the character of the detective, he would have made Holmes speak of his predecessor with greater respect.

An even more serious and cogent case is that of Raymond Chandler whose *The Big Sleep* is said to have demonstrated how the gap between pure detective stories and literary fiction is narrowed. He too has no respect for his predecessors. Talking about detective novels before his, he says “they do not come off intellectually as problems, and they do not come off artistically as fiction. They are too contrived and too little aware of what goes on in the world.” A house divided against itself, the Bible tells us, cannot stand.

In aesthetics, as in ethics, there are no absolute standards. Whether a genre lives and is applauded, or it is ridiculed and left to sink into oblivion, would also depend, in the final analysis, on how stoutly its practitioners defend their cause. If the genre of detective fiction is a dead or dying concern, its apologetic and self-critical exponents, consciously or unconsciously, are to bear part of the blame.

The Problem of Definition

Another source of disrepute is the nature of the definition that is often given to the genre. Although it is hard to find an airtight and really comprehensive definition of most literary concepts, the concept of the genre as commonly presented to the public is quite often too narrow or too wide, even when this is done by people whose attitude towards the works is positive. H. Douglas Thomson (1962:129), described by Howard Haycraft as the “first major historian anywhere on contemporary police romance as living

literature,” defines it as “a problem; a dramatic problem, a ‘feather to tickle the intellectual.’”

S.S. Van Dine (1974:17) (Williard Huntington Wright) says:

The detective novel does not fall under the head of fiction in the ordinary sense, but belongs rather in the category of riddles: it is, in fact, a complicated and extended puzzle cast in fictional form. Its widespread popularity and interest are due, at bottom and in essence, to the same factors that give popularity and interest to the cross-word puzzle.

These statements and many more which stress only the puzzle element in the works, may be ideal for a book-seller or a librarian in classifying works on the shelf. But as definitions, they fail in that they only serve to emphasize the distance between the genre of detective fiction and the so-called “serious literature.” As a viable division of literature, the least that can be said about the best example of it is that it is a full-length work of fiction in which the writer arouses and sustains interest by employing every possible requirement of good writing in the investigation and solution of the mystery surrounding a crime. This way, the gap between good detective fiction and good literary fiction can be seen to be a very narrow one.

Purpose of Literature of the Genre

The purpose which detective fiction is generally believed to have been created to serve - that of temporary “escape” from frustrations of life, or vicarious experience - is another major cause of the disgrace the genre continues to suffer. First there is the Freudian explanation which claims that in murder mysteries we are able to act out guiltlessly, the aggressive fantasies buried in the unconscious; we kill with the killer and we gratify the hunting of fiction.

Above all, there is the crucial factor of individual differences, which does not seem ever to enter the consciousness of the detractors of the genre. Personally, I take a very great interest in detective stories which I have been reading for the past twenty years. I had, no doubt, often read them when I had nothing else to do; but it will be hard to convince me that I read them either as a means of escaping from the harsh realities of my life or to satisfy the killer-instinct which I am not so sure I possess. I cannot even say that I read them as an intellectual exercise, to try to outwit the detective, because on many occasions I have turned to the end to discover who the murderer is before returning (without any diminishing interest), to continue reading. The fact that no two human beings are exactly the same in their emotional needs, automatically means that different people read different detective stories for different reasons. I am at one with Ralph Harper (1976:234) when he says;

For some people, the everyday world is boring; for other who read thrillers, the everyday world is far from boring and they do not wish to leave it for that reason. Sometimes very busy, responsible people leading lives of high tension admit that they read thrillers to relax rather than escape.

Edmund Wilson, for instance, cannot be said to have read them for any of the above reasons. He went to the books as he says, because “almost everybody I know seems to read them, and they have long conversations about them in which I am unable to take part.” But he emerged from the reading not with the excitement that everybody else did, but with even greater frustration because “I finally got to feel that I had to unpack large crates by swallowing the excelsior in order to find at the bottom a few bent rusty nails.”

It may therefore be true of the millions of half-baked specimens of the genre that flood the markets every day, that there is nothing beneath the frivolous façade of the murder mystery. But it would be rash to condemn the entire field, because the good ones serve a

purpose which, as we shall soon see, is not divorced from that of any other literary genre.

Because of these misleading assumptions, even critics partial to the genre and who set out to defend it always end up with statements which in one way or the other, emphasize only its weaknesses rather than its strengths. One of the most perceptive and recent discussions of the genre is Tzvetan Todorov's (1953:131) "Typologie du roman policier." Essentially, the discourse was never intended as praise or condemnation of the genre. But it seems to have been founded on an assumption that sees only the negative or rather "unliterary" aspects of the art. "*Le chef-d'oeuvre littéraire habituel n'entre dans aucun genre,» he says, "si ce n'est le sien propre; mais le chef-d'oeuvre de la littérature de masses est précisément le livre qui s'inscrit le mieux dans son genre."*

Ostensibly, he is speaking in defence of the genre. But what is interesting and rather disturbing here is the similarity between his views and those of someone, like Edmund Wilson who openly expressed his dislike for the genre in the same terms quoted at the beginning of this study. "Le roman policier a ses normes," Todorov goes on to say; "faire 'mieux' qu'elles ne le demandent, c'est en même temps faire moins bien; qui veut 'embellir' le roman policier. Fait de la 'littérature, 'non du roman policier." Finally he declares categorically that "le roman policier par excellence n'est pas celui qui transgresse les règles du genre, mais celui qui s'y conforme."

That Todorov thought he was very honestly defending the genre or at least making an objective comment about it, is also beyond doubt. His whole argument, particularly the final lines, assumes a rigid standardization which only serves to widen the gulf between detective fiction and "la littérature" itself. He seems here to have completely over looked the important fact that such masterpieces as Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* or Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* achieved their singularly stunning effects because they were detective novels constructed against the popularly conceived norms of the genre.

In his argument, Todorov was most certainly influenced by S.S. Van Dine's (1953:132) formulation of the twenty rules which he reduced to eight on the basis of the assumption that "*Sous leur formes originales, ces règles sont assez redondantes,*" In my view, whatever the reputation of S.S. Van Dine in the history of detective fiction, these rules were never set up to guide the genius of the masters. Rather, they were devised to restrict the excesses of the incompetent practitioners, for "the benefit," says Somerset Maugham (1958:60), "of all imitators who have thought by exaggeration to improve upon their models."

Somerset Maugham's "The Decline and Fall of the Detective Story" is apparently another impartial discussion of the genre by one who does not hate it. But like Todorov's study, it seems to me to possess a certain streak of unconscious prejudice. The chink in the armour with which he clads his discourse appears early in the ambivalent declaration that he is going "to make an ambiguous virtue of an equivocal necessity." Then after an elaborate description of the various aspects and categories of the genre he says: "the best writers of detective stories are those who give you the facts and the inferences to be drawn from them in readable English, but without graces of style." What difference is there, one may ask, between Todorov's and Maugham's stand and Edmund Wilson's argument that in his reading of the genre he "ought not to expecting good writing, characterization, human interest, or even atmosphere?" The obvious answer is none.

Add to these flaws in the defence by its advocates the natural tendency in critics to find faults even when none exist, and one immediately understands why the detective novel will continue to suffer so much dishonour, despite its immense popularity.

The Strength of the Genre

An understanding of the sources of errors in judging detective fiction does not explain or answer the lingering question: in what lies the peculiar beauty and attractiveness of the genre? A glance at the history of the form will indicate that at various stages attempts (albeit inadequate), have often been made to answer the question. There is, first of all the artistic consideration, the greatest single factor, since they are usually read more for the way the story is told than for the mere puzzle elements involved. In his famous "Defence of Detective Stories," G.K. Chesterton (1961:118) argues that it is not true that the masses prefer bad literature to good, and therefore accept detective stories because they are bad literature. The mere absence of artistic subtlety," he says, "does not make a book popular. If detective stories are read with more exuberance, it is because they are more artistic." Up to this point I agree with him. But when he added that "the first essential value of the detective stories lies in this, that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed the poetry of modern life," I have the feeling that he had overstretched his praise, and that he was very likely to invite counter criticism from a perceptive reading public.

Somerset Maugham (1953:120-121) takes this argument an important step further in a direction which still tallies with my own reasons for enjoying the works. He sees the secret of the genre's popularity in the simple fact that the detective fiction writers have a story to tell and they do so in the best way possible. In what should be taken as the best way of assessing the true merits of the genre, he sets a typical serious novel of this century against a detective novel and comes up with the very apt observation that:

the "serious" novelists of today have often little or no story to tell; indeed they have allowed themselves to be persuaded that to tell a story is a negligible element in the art they practise. Thus they throw away their strongest appeal to our common human nature, for the desire to listen to stories is surely as old

as the human race; and they have only themselves to blame if the writers of detective stories have stolen their readers from them.

Anybody who has “visited” James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, and John Dos Passo’s *Manhattan Transfer* is likely to agree that Maugham has made a very important point here. Those so-called classics seem to me to raise several doubts about the sanity of some of the judges of literature and the criteria they follow. If these novelists - Joyce and Dos Passos - are not condemned because they purposefully did not set out to tell stories, I wonder why the detective novelist should not be praised for doing just what he set out to do so well, to tell a story.

In this connection, it must be mentioned that Sutherland Scott has come up with a set of fifteen very carefully explained “do’s” and twenty “don’t s” in the writing of detective fiction. Among the “do’s” are such guides as: it should be well written; characters should behave like reasonable human beings, the plot of the mystery story should be fair and should give the reader at least a reasonable chance of arriving at the correct solution by way of the clues provided. His list of “don’ts” includes such injunctions as: a mystery novel should avoid too much sentiment and too much love; it should abjure facetiousness, pomposity and preaching, and should only be funny in the right places, motives and methods which will not stand up to reasonable scrutiny should be avoided.

What is obvious in these regulations, is the fact that they are also regulations for good writing, for the writing of good “serious” novels. But no mention is ever made of Sutherland Scott in the popular criticism of the genre. Instead, stress is often placed on the fettering rules formulated by S. S. Van Dine and Ronald Knox, rules which to me serve no other purpose than to reduce the genre to a mere sport.

The Future of the Genre

Transformation and Rejuvenation

The saying that everything that has a beginning has an end does not appear to me to hold in the case of detective fiction. Edmund Wilson's dictum that it is completely dead cannot be taken too seriously because he neither liked nor understood the genre. Even when an end of the genre enters into the discourse of objective and understanding writers, it is treated with very great caution. "If it has fallen into infirmity," says Harrison Steeves (1962:526), "the doctors may still keep it going for a very long time to come."

It is contrary to the logic of human history that an enterprise which, statistically speaking, offers such pecuniary attractions would be easily abandoned either by writers or publishers. Thus, instead of extinction I see a transformation in the genre, an event which I think is not entirely new to those who have been in touch with the development of the form through the generations. As Sherlock Holmes once pointed out to Doctor Watson (1966:90):

Detection is, or ought to be an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. To tinge it with romanticism produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid.

And for years, this remained the guiding formula in the construction of the detective story. Important exceptions to this rule, however, would include Georges Simenon's Inspector Maigret and Freeman Crofts' Inspector French who are both married men.

But with the advent of Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler, the genre underwent a crucial transformation which would have left Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot spinning in their graves. This was the era of the hard-boiled detective fiction in which the Great Detective had become a Tough Guy, throwing to the winds the

supremacy of reason and the intellect in solving mysteries. We see his new code of conduct – action rather than thought – manifested in the violence that pervades the lives of Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, and James Bond, and which is pushed to the point of an absurdity in Mike Hammer. He is throughout portrayed as a satyr, an investigator obsessed with a killer instinct which completely blurs the boundary line between his role and the villainy of the crooks which he pursues and destroys.

Such tough guy heroes as these do not exist *ex nihilo*. They are the products of a particular period in human history. The thirties and thereafter, in which they were born and bred was an age not only of uncertainty but also of fear, disappointments and violence. David Madden said of it that it was an age in which “human events daily on all levels, contradict the preachments of a genre will continue to fight opponents, but the struggle is ceasing to be an uphill one. Recently, critics have been trying to shift their universe of discourse from the inferiority of the genre vis-à-vis “serious” literature to the study of it *per se*. Literary opinion is gradually veering towards the more subtle and hitherto unconsidered aspects of the form, particularly its mythopoeic potentials. Such titles as “007 and the Myth of the Hero,” “Detective Fiction: a Modern Myth of Violence?” are becoming more and more frequent.

Yet, despite all these efforts, the reputation of the genre will continue to rest on very shaky ground. But as the next section of this study intends to illustrate, writers in Africa have found (as did Nabokov, Borjes, Robbe-Grillet, Durrenmatt and Fowles) that the genre could be completely revived in its long discarded forms. This, it would appear, offers one possible solution to the uncertain fate of the form.

Chapter II

The African Scene

Petals Of Blood

Structure

Roman Jakobson (1971:82), the renowned Russian Formalist and Structuralist, recognized in every work of art the “dominant,” or the focusing component, the element which, he says, “... dominates the entire structure and thus acts as its mandatory and inalienable constituent dominating all the remaining elements and exerting direct influence upon them.” In detective fiction, be it the classical or hard-boiled contemporary form, the dominant element is the tendency on the part of the writer to create suspense through mystification. Tzvetan Todorov (1974:35) refers to it as “*la sustentation*,” “*une figure*,” he adds, “*qu’on aurait prise pour une définition du roman policier*,” and which he explains “*consiste à tenir longtemps le lecteur ou l’auditeur en suspense, et à le surprendre ensuite par quelque chose qu’il était loin d’attendre.*”

The first and by far most distinguishing characteristic of detective fiction is the peculiar nature of its structure – the central element from which all subsequent sustentation emanates. Viktor Sklovskij’s (1971:221) observation on this point, that “in such a work inversion is obligatory,” is particularly enlightening because in every single story worthy of inclusion in this category, there is an intentional and consistent disruption of chronology and the basic causal-temporal relationships of the episodes. To frame it in the terminology of the Russian Formalists and Structuralists that I find very pertinent in this respect, the *fibula* - the raw materials of the story, are made conspicuously subordinate to the *sjuzet* – the plot, the organizing principle or the manipulation of the story stuff.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* is an excellent illustration of this fact. Reduced to its barest *fabula*, the natural order of events in the story would begin with the arrival twelve years ago of Godfrey Munira, his founding of a school and his encounter with the maimed Abdulla, the shop owner with whom he came to share many ideas. It would then move through the widening of the circle of relationships and acquaintances by including the retired prostitute Wanja, whom Abdulla engages to work in his shop, and the expelled Karega whom Munira employs as an extra teacher in his school. It would then proceed by tracing the friendship that developed between the four characters, their role in the destiny of Ilmorog through involvement in the trade union and its henchmen – Mzigo, Kirmeria and Chui. The conflicts that resulted from the relationship of the Munira camp and the Mzigo camp, the private ambitions and frustrations of each would then be presented as a logical precedence to the death by burning, which should in turn be the culmination of the frictions.

But, true to the unimpeachable conventions of the detective novel, *Petals of Blood* opens *in medias res*, with an incident from the final chapter in the long lives of the people –their arrest. The highly dramatic and suspense-packed pronouncement: “They came for him that Sunday,” is immediately followed by a brief interrogation of Munira by two police constables. The second episode is not an explanation or an elucidation of the unanswered questions about the events leading up to the killings and arrests, which were carried over from that first episode. We are carried without prelude into the second arrest, that of Abdulla. The third episode simply thickens the mist of doubt and anxiety as we follow the police officer to the hospital where he tries to interrogate Wanja who is said to be suffering from delirium. Then, as though this were not enough, we are carried in the fourth episode to Karega's residence where he is also shaken from his sleep by “a heavily armed police contingent” (3-4). The fifth and final episode of this first chapter gives us a rather terse account of what has happened by a quotation from the *Daily Mouthpiece* (4-5).

From the point of view of sheer drama and *sustentation* alone, this very first chapter will lose nothing by being compared with the opening chapters of any Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot stories. Their style is racy, the atmosphere unencumbered and suspense-packed, and neither setting nor characterization is allowed to intrude and detract from the purely sensational elements of the presentation. In the first arrest, that of Godfrey Munira, we are not given any elaborate picture of his physical appearance or surroundings. All that we hear is that “he was resting on his bed, Bible open at the Book of Revelation” (1). The two police officers themselves are represented physically by only two insignificant and careless brushstrokes —“one tall, the other short” (1).

This is typical detective novel technique, for, as Williard Huntington Wright (to quote only one out of scores of authorities 1971:319) has indicated:

A “literary” style replete with descriptive passages, metaphors, and word pictures which might give viability and beauty to a novel or romance or adventure, would in a detective story, produce sluggishness in the actional current by diverting the reader’s mind from the mere record of facts... and focusing it on irrelevant aesthetic appeals.

There is another sense in which this first chapter conforms to the typical detective novel - the nature of the crime. Although it is not impossible to center the main action of a detective story on a theft as Wilkie Collins did so successfully in *The Moonstone*, the ideal crime is always murder. The centrality of this particular species of crime in the genre of detective fiction finds expression in Sutherland Scott’s witticism that “a mystery story without a murder is like an omelet without an egg.”

W.H. Auden’s (1971:402) contribution in this respect is the observation that:

murder is unique in that it abolishes the party it injures, so that society has to take the place of the victim and on his behalf demand restitution or grant of forgiveness; it is the one crime in which society has a direct interest.

By climaxing the events of the book in murder, Ngugi has made a very effective use of a central requirement in the construction of the detective novel. And, at least one critic... Clifford B. Robson (1979:95)... has made particular reference to this aspect of the book when he talks of “the ostensible framework of the book, the ‘whodunit’ element of the three deaths.” He has also gone on to show how Ngugi arouses and creates suspense by terse indications of what has happened.

Structurally, the rest of the book exhibits certain characteristics which are usually associated with detective fiction. After that very dramatic opening, the story plunges back in time to the past:

But all that was twelve years after Godfrey Munira, a thin dustcloud trailing behind him, first rode a metal horse through Ilmorog to the door of a moss-grown two-roomed house in what was once a schoolyard.

The past in this novel is not developed in the conventional straightforward flashback technique. It is done through an elaborate and complicated system of reminiscences of the various characters, interspersed with floods of direct authorial comments. In the main, the book is the record of Munira’s recollections. But in a rather shuttlecock fashion it returns to the present and even to the future, before going farther back again in the 1940’s, which makes for extremely difficult reading. While it can be said that it is this complexity which binds the novel to great literature in the sense understood by René Wellek and Austin Warren, paradoxically, it is also this same element that suggests, inter alia, its link with detective fiction. R. Austin Freeman (1942:238-51) said:

The plot of a detective novel is, in effect, an argument conducted under the guise of fiction. But it is a peculiar form of argument. The problem having been stated, the data for its solution are presented inconspicuously and in a sequence purposely dislocated so as to conceal their connections; and the reader's task is to collect the data, rearrange them in their correct logical sequence and ascertain their relations, when the solution of the problem should at once become obvious.

If we take this as one of the very reliable assessment of detective fiction, then it would not be too far-fetched to establish a strong resemblance between *Petals of Blood* and the typical detective novel. And if it is the concealment of connexions that make for good detective fiction then *Petals of Blood* is a very successful one because obscurity is one of the central characteristics of the work. The pattern of reminiscences which Ngugi develops is so intricate that all the connexions between one event and another are virtually invisible.

Characterization

Mention has already been made of the sparseness of character portrayal in the first chapter of the novel. It now remains to be said that in spite of the novel's great length and intensity, its treatment of character is generally superficial. I see much truth in Clifford Robson's (1979:99) accusation that "Ngugi's characterization in *Petals of Blood* is not as successful as in his earlier novels. It lacks the clarity and thoroughness which he has hitherto revealed." Later on he argues with much justification that "we are told certain facts about he major characters but their actions do not generate sufficient emotional conviction to maintain them as valid creation." But Ngugi has very successfully incorporated a moral or philosophical position towards his characters which has been regarded through the years as typical of detective fiction. "The detective novel," says Anthony Storr (1961:2), "is essentially a moral tale in which virtue must triumph

over vice, the guilty be unmasked and the evil doer punished.” To this, Charles J. Rolo (1981:245) adds that “mystery stories are bloodstained fairy tales which enact the cycle, Paradise Lost- Paradise Sought For – Paradise Regained.” This argument has been carried over by Bernth Lindfors (1980:15) who has made a very good attempt at establishing the link between Ngugi’s work and popular literature. He says:

it [*Petals of Blood*] justifiably may be termed “popular” because it appeals to deep human emotions in a forthright manner by portraying highly dramatic events emblematic of elemental struggles between good and evil... The fundamental oppositions are always clear: angels wrestle with devils, and after a series of unjust setbacks, begin to emerge victorious from the struggle. At the end of the novel, paradise lost promises to give way to paradise regained.

The note on which the novel ends is certainly an optimistic one, for, the paradise which governmental corruption and capitalism had tried to overwhelm, seems, with the death of its foundation heads to be on the verge of being regained. It would appear that Ngugi here is re-enacting once more the old principle of poetic justice which Nadya Aisenbery rightly considers “the *sine qua non* of the detective novel.”

Ngugi’s portrayal of Inspector Godfrey is second only to the intense dramatic opening as the most important single element that binds the book to the detective novel tradition. Regarded by Bernth Lindfors as “an African Sherlock Holmes,” he is depicted as a detective through and through. There is nothing said or shown of him that does not directly pertain to his profession of investigation. From the very first mention of him, there is little doubt that we are meeting a direct descendant of the Dupin-Holmes-Poirot Family.

As we frequently encounter in the works of the masters in the genre, Ngugi begins by establishing confidence in the investigator.

Just before Hercule Poirot appears in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Agatha Christie makes Flora say: “They say he has done the most wonderful things.” Later on, before Poirot actually begins his investigations, Colonel Melrose says: “from what I hear, this little fellow has done remarkable things.”

In *Petals of Blood*, we are told that Inspector Godfrey “had served in various capacities under various heads from colonial times of the present” (43). The colonial days, in spite of the domination of the white masters, were characterized by a scrupulously honest attitude towards law and justice. Reference to his services at that period is meant to make us recognize that he was an investigator to count on. Furthermore, we are told that:

Crime for him was a kind of jigsaw puzzle, and he believed that there was a law to it... a law of crime... a law of criminal behaviour.... And he believed that if you looked hard enough you could see this law operating in the even the smallest gestures (43).

This is almost a summary of much of the philosophy of investigation that has been recorded ever since Poe created Dupin. In particular, in *A Study in Scarlet*, Sherlock Holmes points out to Doctor Watson that “there is a strong family resemblance about misdeeds.” In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Hercule Poirot tells Dr. Sheppard that “you will find... if you have much to do with cases of this kind that they all resemble each other.”

His motive for investigation is never money, nor any particular love for the victim. “Not that I care for money,” Poirot tells Flora in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. His aim is only to uncover facts and unmask the criminal hypocrites. “I go into a case to help the ends of justice and the work of the police,” Sherlock Holmes also told Doctor Watson. In *Petals of Blood*, Inspector Godfrey assumes the same moral position when he tells the murder suspect, Munira, that “we only want to serve truth and justice” (44). Earlier on we had been told that he was “neutral,” exercising the same “awesome power

over politicians, professionals, businessmen, petty criminals” that Holmes and Poirot and the latter day sleuths exercise over the community in which they undertook their investigations.

In the end, the fact that it was actually Wanja and not Karega who committed the crime does not taint his reputation as a pursuer of truth and justice. His reasons for accusing Karega have the backing of sound logical reasoning in the strict deductive tradition of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot:

Three Managing Directors are burnt to death in the house of a woman who was known to be rather partial to you. You are the General... Secretary of a union that has called for higher wages. The directors meet to decide on your demands. They come to the conclusion that your demands are too high, that should you declare a strike all your people would be expelled and new workers engaged. On the same night, the directors are all burnt (307).

He makes very plain to the suspect that he proceeds by *elimination*: “I work... on the principle of elimination,” he tells Karega. Here again he is employing the typical detective novel language. According to this principle, even an innocent person could be indicated because it holds that when you have eliminated all the impossibilities, then, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

To the extent that its structure is inverted, beginning with the crime, a murder and which is investigated by an inspector who bears a very strong resemblance to Sergeant Cuff, Holmes and Poirot, *Petals of Blood* could be said to show very strong affinities with the detective novel genre, particularly the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie.

Perpétue Et L'habitude Du Malheur

Structure

Unlike *Petals of Blood*, *Perpétue* does not have a sensational and dramatic opening; neither does it reveal in an obvious fashion a conscious influence of the detective novel technique. But, nevertheless, in both its structure and characterization, elements are discernible which readers of detective fiction would identify immediately as rather familiar.

Chronologically, and in the normal causal- temporal terms, the story begins not with the arrival of Essola in Oyolo but with his arrest, torture and imprisonment by the government of Baba Toura. Soon after his arrest, his sister Perpétue, is forcibly withdrawn from school by their money-minded mother, Maria, and given into marriage to the young civil servant Edouard. Her married life proves a dismal failure. Her husband's ambition to rise in the civil service is severely thwarted by his own inherent dullness. Then his obsession with personal unfulfilment is sharpened to a stiletto by the realization that his wife is his intellectual superior. This feeling engenders an acute bitterness against her which finds expression in wanton cruelty and unrestricted acts of humiliation. But Perpétue bears the degradations, and with a resigned acceptance of her fate, succumbs to the indignity of becoming the mistress of an unscrupulous police officer. This, she is made to understand, is the only means of making Edouard realize his most cherished dream... getting his name on the pass list of a course for junior police officers. This, however, does not make Edouard a better man, and as her woes multiply she subsequently loses the zest for living and is reported to have died in childbirth, just six months before Essola is released.

But in the structure of the novel as we have it, the story begins with Essola already out of prison and on his way back to his village.

On his arrival in the village he learns more about the death of his sister which he immediately vows to investigate. The investigation then traces the dubious circumstance so her life to the day of her death. This novel, insofar as the quest for the truth is concerned, is full of *sustentation*. But it achieves its *sustentation* with particular effectiveness through the fact that within the inverted structure the author exploits one of the central elements of detective fiction - the puzzle.

We do not find in this book anything approaching the hermetically-sealed-room-enigma that characterizes the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, Agatha Christie, Conan Doyle, Emile Gaboriau or Gaston Leroux. But the entire story is structured around a series of unanswered and sometimes unanswerable questions. These, as we shall soon see, certainly do not possess the intensity of the enigmas in the works of the masters just quoted above. But, in their own right, they are puzzling enough to sustain the enquiry and consequently, the reader's interest and curiosity to the end.

In the first place, it may be fallacious logic in the field of medical science to wonder "comment une femme qui est déjà mère de deux enfants peut-elle mourir en couches?" But, given the mentality of the people and the very suspicious frame of mind in which Essola was at that moment, it constitutes some kind of enigma. From this crucial doubt, others emanate, providing the novel with one of the main unifying threads. This explains why the next question is a demand for the cause: "De quoi Perpetwa est-elle morte au juste? ... comment a-t-elle quitté cette vie?" (44).

Investigations lead Essola to the crux of the matter.... The abject misery to which she had been subjected: "Perpétue avait fini par devenir la maîtresse de M'Barga'Onana" (213). But this finding only leads, as is common in detective novels, to further questions:

Avait-elle, après avoir été violentée, perdu le goût d'elle-même au point de laisser faire et de s'accomoder de l'immondice avec la résignation des âmes débiles, dont elle n'était pourtant pas? Avait-elle été convaincu par le réalisme

abominable de son mari, ce héros de lâcheté et d'hypocrisie? Avait-elle subi des pressions, des menaces peut- être, don't elle n'avait pas ose faire part à Anna-Maria? (213).

And so the story unfolds itself, one question following another until the final bit of evidence is uncovered.

Characterization

In *Perpétue*, the investigator is of a peculiar case. He is not an amateur detective like Poe's Dupin or Doyle's Holmes. He is not even an officer from the police department like Wilkie Collins's Sergeant Cuff, Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq or Ngugi's Inspector Godfrey. He is no tough-guy like Chandler's Marlowe or Hammett's Sam Spade. He is just an ordinary individual who sets out for purely personal reasons, to investigate the real circumstances surrounding the death of his sister. We cannot by any stretch of the imagination compare Essola's muddled, tormented and frustrated mind with the deep scientific imagination of Holmes or any other great detective. But he is imbued with a certain perspicacity that places him not too far from the master detectives.

In a typical detective story, a measure of ambiguity usually surrounds the death of the victim. It is usually not quite clear whether the victim committed suicide or was actually killed. And even when it is certain that he may have been murdered, in the eyes of the uninformed public, the death is usually taken as just another instance of a natural phenomenon. It is the detective with his intuitive perception who sees through the sham and hypocrisies and discerns a crime where the rest of the world sees an accident or death from natural causes.

Essola is cast in this mould. He will not take a no for an answer. He alone is convinced that his sister did not die a natural death, that she was in fact, murdered. He tells his cousin his feelings on the

issue: “depuis que j’ai appris le mariage et la mort de Perpetue, il ne s’est pas passé une seule nuit sans que, au cours d’une insomnie, je ne revienne longuement sur ce malheur, pour le retourner, le *dépecer*” (my emphasis, 45). The choice of the word “dépecer” is very important in this respect. Its nearest English equivalent is to “analyze” or “reconstruct,” which is precisely what the great literary detectives have done each time they have been confronted with a case. Essola is not just an idle thinker, he devises a theory which he immediately impresses upon his mother with the ruthless boldness of a Hercule Poirot: “tu l’as vendue en faisant des calculs en faveur de ton fils bien aimé.” He then draws the conclusion “et voila le crime d’où devait découler la tragedie ... l’assassin de Perpétue, c’est toi...” (46).

Then he sets out to investigate and prove this theory, vowing, “j’irai partout où je peux recueillir des lumières sur la mort de ma pauvre petite soeur” (64). He is determined and courageous, and proves his theory with a precision that can only be ascribed to the best of the detectives: Perpétue had in fact been sold and it was her mother’s rapaciousness that had been a direct cause of her death. The issues at stake and the kind of death she suffers in the story are of course much more complicated than I have indicted here, and would have to include a full examination of the tradition Beti is castigating in the book.

In the relationship between Essola and his cousin Amougou, we catch a distant echo of Sherlock Holmes’s companion, Doctor Watson, or Hercule Poirot’s Doctor Hastings. Amougou is portrayed as a far less intelligent man than Essola, and as is often the case with the tales of Holmes and Doctor Watson, he is made to act as a foil to Essola’s perceptiveness, surprised at his determination to find out the truth, yet not reluctant to follow him from one village to the other.

When Essola undertakes the last major trip of his investigation to Fort-Nègre, he is described in typical detective fiction language: “les deux cousins revinrent au pays vers la fin de juillet, *enquête terminée*” (my emphasis, 91). Like Sherlock Holmes who would return to his laboratory with specimens of his findings for analysis, we hear that

Essola “*reconstitua* donc, par écrit, toutes les circonstances qui avaient entouré la morte de Perpétue” (91).

Finally, when in the last chapter Essola murders his own brother and receives a compliment and a reward instead of a punishment, we are immediately reminded of Sherlock Holmes and the latter day detectives such as Sam Spade, Philip Marlow and James Bond, who are encouraged and even licensed to kill (as in the case of Bond), in the service of their profession as investigators. But in this book, the irony must not be missed because Essola’s reward is being used by Beti to emphasize not so much a consciousness of the desire for justice as we find in the detective novels, but to illustrate the misadministration and social injustices which he has condemned so vehemently throughout the rest of the book.

Witnesses and Red-herring Motif

A common feature of detective fiction is the writer’s consistent manipulation of clue and witnesses in a manner designed to exasperate the investigator, while exciting our curiosity. In ordinary life a witness is defined as somebody who is in possession of the facts relating to a case or an event; whereas nobody would be summoned to testify on a matter who has not enough knowledge of the facts to “recueillir les lumières sur la mort de ma pauvre petite soeur” as Essola says, in detective fiction, the exception proves the rule. There, witnesses are perpetually unwilling to talk, and through their reluctance heighten the effect of the suspense.

Perpétue is not devoid *of* these elements. Very early in his investigation, Essola approached his cousin’s wife, katri, who was in the best position to give him every bit of information that he needed about the life and death of his sister. Yet we are told that “il (Essola) tenta sans success de faire parler katri, laquelle, pourtant, en savait long manifestement sur cette affaire” (49).

A second key witness is Nkomedzo, “le guerisseur” who also had very intimate knowledge of the facts of Perpétue’s life. But when Essola *visits* him with his cousin Amougou, we learn that “d’abord, ils n’obtinrent rien” because as he claims, “le silence était un devoir de son art et une assurance pour ceux qui, se finant à lui, lui abandonnaient des secret en depot” (65). It is only after a bribe, “un petit cadeau... de quelque billets de mille” (65), that he was ready to talk. But, even the fact that he talks merely accentuates the suspense, for, by virtue of his profession there is such a reputation for duplicity about him that whatever he says should be taken only with a pinch of salt. Beti says he belongs to the group of “les imposteurs et les charlatans” (64).

The inverted structure therefore, and the creation of a central character involved in a quest for the truth, and surrounded by a cast of lesser characters whose activities remind us constantly of similar situations in the popular detective novels, provides us with enough reasons to be able to regard Mongo Beti’s novel here as a detective story within a narrow range.

The Grass Is Singing

Structure

The Grass is Singing shares with Ngugi's *Petal of Blood*, Beti's *Perpétue*, and all other stories that fall within the category of detective fiction, certain essential elements. First, it deals with a crime which is murder, and involves a detective. Then the story is told in a manner that proceeds from effect to cause.

In strict chronological terms, the events that make up the plot of the book would be thus arranged; Mary, the only surviving child from a crumbling marriage.... Her mother treated her father with such intense contempt that he needed to get drunk constantly to look cheerful in her presence... is compelled by a fear of loneliness and scorn from the rest of the white society, to marry Dick Turner. The marriage, just as we witnessed in *Perpétue*, is a complete failure because genuine love sat too lightly on Dick's mind when he proposed to Mary. "He knew perfectly well what he wanted..., a mother for his children and someone to run his house for him." As is normal in such relationships, they discover as soon as they are married that they were never meant for each other. Mary would be satisfied with nothing less than a responsible job amidst the stimulation of town life; Dick seems tied to his farm and is undisturbed by the isolation and poverty which come with such a vocation. The relationship begins to break down almost at once, and Mary's disappointment assumes the status of a neurosis.

The employment of the black servant Moses, only aggravates her situation. She is repulsed by his race, but attracted by his manliness, and between the two, in spite of the fact that she had once whipped him and is haunted by the fear of revenge, a love-hate relationship begins to develop which bodes ill for Mary's reputation amongst the other whites. The arrival of Tony Marston turns this into an

accusation and in an atmosphere pregnant with the dread of abandoning their land, Mary Turner is killed by Moses.

The narrative of the book, however, assumes a different structure. As appropriately pointed out by Roberta Rubenstein (1979:18), it “begins not with the unfolding account of her life but with a factual newspaper account of her death at the hands of her black servant, Moses. Thus the cyclic pattern of the narrative is initiated with the end at the beginning.” Then the language too, which reminds us very strongly of the style of detective novels, as noted earlier, is pointed out by Rubenstein (1979:18) to be the one thing which helps the remainder of the novel which “uncoils like a slow spring as the extended linear flashback develops the events culminating in the murder.”

One element worthy of very special note here is the nature of the announcement of the murder which we have already met in *Petals of Blood*, and which it must be stressed, is used as a popular convention in detective novels. There is of course the important difference between this particular report and the others. In *Perpétue*, the accusation against Maria by Essola comes very early in the second chapter. But substantial proof of guilt only comes late in the narrative. In *Petals of Blood*, there is no accusation at the time the report is made. We are merely told that a man believed to be a trade-union agitator has been held. But in *The Grass is Singing*, the identity of the culprit is immediately released together with his confession of guilt: “The houseboy, who has been arrested, has confessed to the crime” (9). To present the culprit in this manner does not, as might be expected, mitigate the intensity of the suspense that should normally come with concealment. That “no motive has been discovered” (9), for the outrage is enough to spur the reader on. As the author says, “it is thought he was in search of valuables” (9). But it defies all our previous notions of theft if a man in search of valuable so willingly confesses his crime.

Rubenstein's observation on this point is again quite illuminating. "on the narrative level," she says, "tension is created partly through the sense of inevitability established by the opening, as the reader later comes to understand the psychological significance of that impersonal report, and partly from the gap between the "facts" and the truth."

Characterization

One of the unavoidable paradoxes of the art of the detective novel is the fact that although the detective is always called in at the moment when there does not seem to be any real progress in the investigation, his approach is always designed to baffle, obfuscate and even exasperate the common observer. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, for example, Hercule Poirot exhibits that tendency when he is called in after all police efforts have led nowhere. He surveys the scene critically and then tells Dr. Sheppard that he "proceeds with method." But the very first "methodical" question that he asks seems to everybody else to come off on a tangent to the main problem. He summons Parker, the servant of the house and asks: "When you broke down the door with Dr. Sheppard last night, and found your master dead, what was the state of the fire?" When the servant tells him that fire was burning very low, he exclaims with an almost triumphant "ah!"

The next question does not seem to be more enlightening than the first, for, he wants to know who moved the chair from its original position. The common reader or observer would have expected him to pursue with greater eagerness that he displayed some obvious lines of investigation. There was, for example, the case of the fingerprints, the faulty alibis and particularly Captain Paton's unaccountable disappearance or Parker's strange nervousness. But Poirot very discreetly leads the reader through a tortuous route whose purpose seems only to intensify the confusion which the maze of clues and

contradictory testimonies had already set in motion. This is precisely what Yu K. Scheglov (1977:66) meant when he pointed out in his very enlightening study that a cardinal requirement of the genre is that it must solve the problem through “a solution reached from some unexpected angle, and on the basis of facts which had not been treated as significant.”

Doris Lessing’s portrayal of Sergeant Denham seems to me to be quite strongly reminiscent of such an approach towards characterization. According to Tony Marston and the common reader, “the important thing, the thing that really mattered... was to understand the background, the circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary, the pattern of their lives” (26). But, like Hercule Poirot or any of the great detectives, Sergeant Denham cleanly avoids this expected approach to his findings, although with a conscious intent of covering the facts. Tony Marston knows, and we do too, that it was universally known that the Turners had broken “the first law of South African white society, which is: ‘Thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point, because if you do, the niggars will see he is as good as you are’” (221). Marston and the reader also know that in any case involving an African, the police were bound to be decidedly prejudiced against him. But Sergeant Denham, after his first remark: “Bad business” (23), completely ignores the fact that the crime had already been confessed by the native and proceeds Poirot-like to interrogate Marston: “How long have you been here?,” “When did you know about this business?” and things of the sort.

None of these questions has any direct bearing to the crime, at least from a superficial point of view, and Marston’s reactions are understandably unpleasant. He feels “wounded, even insulted” (24), and looks on the cover-up “in utter astonishment” (27). The readers, quite naturally sympathizes with him because the impression has been created that Sergeant Denham is simply out to get him, that he is quite deliberately evading the main issue at stake. As in the case of detectives of literature, the real meaning and importance of Sergeant

Denham's interrogation only emerges towards the end of the narrative.

The actual killing is described in Chapter eleven where we learn how Mary opened her mouth to speak, and as she did so saw Moses's hand lifted towards her, and she tried in vain to ward him off. Yet, anybody who has read the previous chapter with understanding will have no doubt that consciously or unconsciously, Marston was really responsibly for the crime. The relationship between Mary and her husband had totally broken down, as had her own mental state, while in the eyes of the white public her attitude towards Moses continuously gave cause for alarm. Although she tried to treat him with the contempt that her colour demanded of her, his masculinity radiated a certain power of attraction which she found irresistible: "the powerful, broad-built body fascinated her" (175); "from the house she sometimes caught a glimpse of him bending... naked from the waist up" (176); between them, we are told, "the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the personal relation" (177-78). Moses, however, took no undue advantage of this; whether he went further than just undressed and dressing his mistress is not directly expressed in the story, and we have no really pressing cause to push the point further. What is important is that he still remained a faithful and dutiful servant until the arrival of Tony Marston. When Marston found Moses putting Mary's dress on her he "was struck motionless by surprise" (229), and immediately chased Moses off: "Get out before I kick you out," he shouted to Moses. It was this command, coming when it did, that brought out the animal that was in Moses. He had hitherto treated his mistress with great concern for her health, which he saw that she did not disapprove of. But he noticed that when Marston ordered him to go away, Mary too joined. At this he enquired: "Madame want me to go because of this boss?" Mary admitted this. From this point on, her death at the hands of this servant she had always treated with severity and contempt was only a matter of time.

That Sergeant Denham sensed this very subtle but crucial factor in the murder case is, I think, a master stroke of perceptiveness which places him (albeit ironically) in the direct line of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. Ironically because, whereas Holmes and Poirot used their perceptiveness to uncover the crimes, he uses his to conceal incriminating evidence.

Xala

Structure

In *Xala*, Ousmane Sembène has created a novel that stands apart in structure and characterization from all the others we have so far been considering. Quite simply, it is the story of El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye, “un ancien instituteur” and a prominent “homme d’affaire,” a “puissant quinquagénaire” who discovers on the night of the marriage to a third wife that he has suddenly become impotent. Upon the confident assumption that he has been bewitched, he sets out to discover who the miscreant is, as a prelude to a cure. In an atmosphere tense with shifting suspicion he moves from one witch-doctor to the other until he lights on Serigne Mada who cures him of the disease, and through him he subsequently learns that the culprit was neither any of his wives, nor business associates as had been highly suspected. The “criminal” is a poor and disinherited beggar who sat daily at his gate, and who had come to seek vengeance for the man’s past misdeeds.

As the plot outline above indicates, there is no murder. The crime is not even a theft; El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye merely finds that some vital aspect of his life has suddenly become dormant and sets out to investigate it himself. We do not have any inversion or rearrangement of the parts which Sklovskij regarded as a prime characteristic of the mystery story. The story line is direct, and devoid of any abstract philosophy or moralizing of the type we find in the other three novels. Conforming to the strict Aristotelian concept of plot, it begins from the chronological beginning and proceeds straightforwardly through a middle to the end. We see El Hadji Abdou preparing for his new marriage and the sexual encounter that would naturally take place on the first night. We see him discovering that he has lost his potency, we see him reacting to the loss, and we see him going from one village to the other in search of a solution.

Within this linear progression the book achieves a dramatic effectiveness that was almost absent or clouded in the other works, and in this venture one of Ousmane Sembène's most powerful weapons in his concentration on the purely actional elements of the tale. Nothing is mentioned which is not directly related to the central problem - the restoration of El Hadji Abdou's potency. Thus, all the relationships into which he enters after the discovery of impotence are so arranged that they serve to continuously heighten interest. His encounter with his wives, business associates, drivers and the witch-doctors, are all designed to intensify the effect of tension that is implicit in his tragedy. The effectiveness of these relationships depends on the fact that none of them actually brings him a solution to the problem. The solutions they offer are all false, and, as Sklovskij (1971:221) has further said, "the manipulation of false and true solutions is what constitutes the method of organizing the mystery."

Characterization

Ousmane Sembène's attitude towards his characters is the foundation of the book's success as a dramatic detective tale. His concern is not with the psychological analysis of character. He reduces the calamity to only a few adjectives: "Xala: El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye était désespéré," "El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye était affreusement déprimé" (47), "El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye souffrait atrocement de son Xala" (67). These few central adjectives are backed up by judiciously chosen overt actions which give us just enough insight into his fate: "Il contemplait la porte de son bureau sans rien voir du mauvais travail des tacherons" (47); "à son bureau, El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye demeurait de longs moments absent, absorbé. Son regard ne croisait plus celui de sa secrétaire vendeuse" (67). In the same breathe, Ousmane Sembène tells us how "avant, quand celle- cil lui tournait le dos, il détaillait la paire de joues de ses

fesses bien rondies, ses riens bein cambers. Dans son milieu, le derrière de sa secrétaire était matière à plaisanteries, à rigolades” (67).

El Hadji Abdou’s reactions contribute to the tension chiefly because of the fact that Ousmane Sembène has created in him a naive individual who, in view of his predicament, will believe anything. Not only is he very suspicious of his wives, but is willing to follow the advice of people like the president of their association who is not even sure himself of what he is saying.

The Least-Likely-Person Motif

The strength of this novel lies also in the author’s exploitation of the least-likely-person motif, which is generally accepted as providing the central suspense of the detective story. It is not enough that El Hadji Abdou has been made unnecessarily naïve; Ousmane Sembène has provided abundant ground for him to suspect his wives. The victim argues, for instance that it must be Oumi N’Doye, his second wife, and with quite convincing reasons: “elle était très jalouse, envieuse. Depuis qu’elle avait appris ce mariage, les moomé chez Oumi N’Doye étaient des nuits d’enfer” (47). And throughout the period of El Hadji Abdou’s suffering, Ousmane Sembène does not actually leave us with much room to carry our suspicion beyond the circle of his wives. His focus of attention is too strongly on the third marriage which was not very favorably received by the other two. The new wife is described as young and attractive, while the others are already old. And, even without mentioning it directly, Ousmane Sembène makes it very clear that it is the man’s penis which is going to be the principal actor in the game. This makes it impossible for the reader to suspect anybody who does not directly or indirectly stand to gain or lose something by the state of El Hadji Abdou’s virility. In this way, Ousmane Sembène has given full play to the principle of false or misleading solution which as Sklovskij observes again, usually takes the form of riddles in folktales.

It is only in the very last chapter that the curtain is raised and we see that the man actually responsible for the Xala is the beggar. Yet, at no point in the earlier chapters were we ever made to think of him as a real threat to El Hadji Abdou's person, other than the fact that he constantly disturbed his silence with his singing. He did not seem to constitute an integral part of the story as his wives and the other women did. Whenever his name was mentioned, it was done in a way designed to suggest that he was absolutely inessential, a mere nuisance to the man's residence. But the introduction of the beggar at the crucial moment of the story when investigation had almost reached a stalemate, is not a *deus ex machina* or a gargantuan flung at the reader at the last minute to provide an unconvincing solution to an impasse.

Like an accomplished craftsman in the art of detective fiction, Ousmane Sembène has kept very closely to the Fair-Play method of presenting the material. In this respect, Sutherland Scott (1969,136) says:

The plot of a mystery novel must be fair. It should give the reader at least a reasonable chance of arriving at the correct solution by way of the clues provided. These clues may be cunningly concealed. They may be slipped surreptitiously into one's hands like a bailiff's warrant; they may, like Poe's Purloined Letter, be so obvious as to pass unnoticed. But they must be there.

Dorothy Sayers had also agreed with this point in adding that "the reader must be given every clue... but he must not be told – lest he should see the solution too far ahead."

In *Xala*, Ousmane Sembène has prepared us for the final revelation with consummate skill. Thus, when we look back at the various moments when the beggar's name had been mentioned we come to realize that, had we been keen in observing the clues, it would not have been out of place to include him in our list of prime

suspects. When, for example, the “président du Groupement” comes to see El Hadji Abdou and learns of the tragedy that had befallen his friend, he asks: “Tu ne soupconnes personne? Une de tes épouses?” (52). We are then informed of his reactions in this manner:

“Laquelle?” se demandait El Hadji, allant vers la fenêtre qu’il referma.

... Ces mendiants, il faut tous les boucher pour le restant de leur vie.

... Adja Awa Astou, par exemple? (52).

Why, one wonders, should he immediately think of the beggar and insist on his imprisonment at the moment when he was being asked if he suspected anyone? The unexpressed here is that he knows, or rather feels, that there is something between the beggar and himself which could make the former cruel enough to tamper with the source of his greatest pleasure. Something which he dared not mention to the president for fear of losing his respect before him.

On his first day in office after the discovery that he is impotent, we are given another surreptitious insight into the problem ... the life of the beggar:

Le mendiant faisait partie du décor, comme les murs sales, les vieux camions transportant de la marchandise. Le mendiant était très connu à ce carrefour. Le seul qui le trouvait agacant était El Hadji. El Hadji, maintes fois l'avait fait rafler par la police. Des semaines après, il revenait reprendre sa place. Un coin qu'il semblait affectionner. (48-9).

This bit of information, like the material clues in the best detective novels, seems at that moment a very insignificant trifle. But it makes a telling point in that it shows that El Hadji personally did not like the man, that he was the only one who hated the beggar. Set

against a background of extravagant wealth and general popularity enjoyed by El Hadji Abdou, the mention of the beggar is far from being a mere hint. Ousmane Sembène is here suggesting ingeniously that the man had only one real enemy... the beggar; and that the beggar too had only one enemy... El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye. With the facts understood in this light, it is hard to doubt that the beggar is actually guilty when in the end it is revealed that he was the one who had brought such suffering to El Hadji Kader Bèye's life.

Chapter III

The WHYDUNIT

In spite of the great lengths to which I have gone in the previous chapter to establish some measure of similarity between *Petals of Blood*, *Perpétue*, *The Grass is Singing* and *Xala* on the one hand, and detective novels on the other, it would be a sweeping generalization to call these works detective novels in the known and generally accepted sense of the word. As we have seen, they are not as a rule, preoccupied mainly with the dove-tailing of clues, place, time and other details as a means of resolving any particularly ingenious locked-room mystery.

As for the chief investigator, here he is, in the strictest sense of the word, not the kind of professional or amateur whose methods of unraveling complicated webs of clues constitute the point of greatest interest in Edgar Allan Poe, Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie. None of them here has that peculiar endowment of which Sherlock Holmes told Doctor Watson that “by a man’s fingernails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boots, his trouser-knees, by his shirt-cuffs – by each of these things a man’s calling is plainly revealed.” None of them here is a thinking machine, and the books are not in any way designed primarily for mental gymnastics. This is, however, not to contradict the case which was earlier on built in defense of the resemblance of Inspector Godfrey and Sergeant Denham to the master detectives in the masterpieces of the genre.

Inspector Godfrey and Sergeant Denham belong to the police department as did Wilkie Collins’s Sergeant Cuff, and Emile Gaboriau’s Monsieur Lecoq. Inspector Godfrey’s approach to his job, as already noted is not inferior to that of the best names in detective fiction. But the argument can hardly be legitimately carried

beyond this point without the danger of misunderstanding and misinterpreting the facts these African novels embody.

The main difference between these works and pure detective novels is the extent of the emphasis the writers place on detection and the detective himself. In the classical detective fiction, he was the central character, the focus of all attention. He was the life of the story. But, compared to the amount of space taken up by other non detective matters, the proportion of space devoted to the detective and his investigation is very small indeed. Art from the fact that Inspector Godfrey's expertise is described or reported rather than dramatized as is often the case in the great detective novels, he is physically present and exercising his knowledge of investigation in only six pages of the second chapter of the book, and later in not more than fifteen in the twelfth chapter. For a novel like *Petals of Blood* that contains three hundred and forty-five pages of dense materials, this must seem negligible enough to exclude the work from the class of detective novels. In the second novel, *The Grass is Singing*, we never hear of Sergeant Denham again after his initial appearance in the first chapter which occupies only thirty-five pages in a book of two hundred and fifty pages. Emphasis is distributed across the landscape of the various characters whose lives make up the story stuff.

In their preoccupation with society, with corruption in high places, one is constantly reminded of the hard-boiled novel which, Somerset Maugham (1958:130) rightly says.

...lays little stress on the detection of crime. It is concerned with the people, crooks, gamblers, thieves, blackmailers, corrupt policemen, dishonest politicians, who commit crimes. Incidents occur, but incidents derive their interest from the individuals who are concerned in them they have had to make their people not only credible, but convincing.

The temptation then, to establish a case for them as belonging to the school of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler is quite high. But the soul of the hard-boiled novel is the tough-guy hero. None of the central characters in these African novels bears even the slightest resemblance to a tough-guy. Neither Essola nor Inspector Godfrey, nor even Sergeant Denham is “a superman” who, as Charles Rolo puts it, “goes crashing through life beating hell out of the bad men and getting lustfully played by females who are Sex Appeal personified.”

The Social Component

From the above analysis, one could with much certainty assert that, although in the reading of these novels one is constantly reminded of Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie or Dashiell Hammett, the feelings that novelists instill in us by the time we turn the last pages are not the same as those we encounter at the end of the best sellers in the detective genre. What emerges is the same kind of message that we find in Benjamin Disraeli’s *Trancred* (1847) in which, as Joseph Blotner remarks, the hero recoils from politics, finding spiritual and political insight amidst comic opera imbroglios in the deserts of the Holy Land. It is the same message we get from E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924) in which personal tragedies emphasize national tragedy of a divided and unhappy India governed by inflexible and unfeeling Britain. It is the same kind of message we hear in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) about a totalitarian world of the future in which stability is achieved through the destruction of freedom and the soul. It is the message of George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), a chilling world of the future in which the regime can control past and present, and literally make two and two equal five for its slaves.

These novels therefore possess or display a social relevance that completely transcends entertainment. They are social novels (I am

not making any very strong distinction between the social and the political novel), and I use the term “social I novel” here stipulatively in the same sense that W. French used it. He defined a social novel (1966:7) as:

A work that is so related to some specific historical phenomenon that a detailed knowledge of the historical situations is essential to a full understanding of *why* the historical events involved occurred.

But they are not *pure*-social novels; they are psycho-social novels in which psycho-sociological factors are sued to explain crime.

In her discussion of the state of detective fiction in France, A. E. Murch (1958:251) made an observation which could be used to throw some light on this point. Talking about the kind of fiction which is generally associated with Georges Simenon, she says.

The mechanism of the puzzle device (is) ... given far less importance than in English crime fiction...

The detective must have patience, untiring watchfulness, an intuitive flair. His job is not so much to collect and marshal evidence for use at the trial – that is largely the province of others – as to succeed in arresting the right man. The reader looks beyond “How?” to “Who?” and on with even greater interest to “Why?”

To know the identity of the criminal is not the end, as it so often is in English fiction, but to understand him, possibly to sympathize with him. Hence the emphasis upon his psychological history, the influences that brought him to commit the crime, the *motif* of ‘extenuating circumstances.

One may qualify this argument by adding that in the African scene presented here, the emphasis is distinctively on “WHY.” Instead of the WHODUNIT we have the WHYDUNIT. The plots of the stories are built principally around the psycho-sociological mainsprings of the crimes.

Petals of Blood, for example, is mainly the unraveling of the story of the characters’ emotional or psychological response to the social and political elements in post-independence Kenya that had reduced Munira, Karega, Abdulla and Wanja to the “criminals” that the law finally found them to have become. It is a comprehensive study of the reality in a developing capitalist country and how the craving for money and power can reduce the human race to a species of monsters. Mongo Beti’s *Perpétue* is, in an important sense, the study of Essola’s psychological response to the disastrous effects of neocolonialism. *The Grass is Singing* has been described as “as complete a documentation of psychological disintegration as might occur in any modern novel of sensibility,” the psychological effects of what it means to be thirty and single in a white, racist, colonialist society. *Xala*, though devoid of any very deep psychological analysis of character, is structured along lines of action dictated by El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye’s emotional attitude towards his physical deprivation. Here one cannot help wondering whether the man’s impotence is a more serious issue for the society than the original crime mentioned only at the end of the tale, which had brought him to a position of such eminence. Ostensibly, we are made to sympathize with him for the loss of his potency. But we know that the author was drawing attention to an inhumane world, a world in which priorities have become polluted and subverted.

Setting

In these novels, the environment is more than just atmosphere and information. It is a very far cry from what W.H. Auden called

“The Great Good Place.” It is made to be the very breeding ground for crimes of the sort depicted. What was said of Ross Macdonald’s Southern California and Maj Sjöwall’s Sweden can truly be said of the African environment that provides the settings of these novels, that in the novels “society itself provides an impetus for violence in the fragmenting of the social fabric” If anything, it approximates the world painted by Raymond Chandler (1969:297-98) in his essay, “The Simple Art of Murder,” a world in which:

Gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels,...a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making. Where no man can walk down a dark valley in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing, a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will quickly fade back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up may have friends with long guns or the police may not like your testimony.

In *Perpétue*, the murderer of Perpétue is not exactly Maria or Edouard, or Martin who becomes the scapegoat at the end. It is the Unlike *Petals of Blood* or *The Grass is Singing*, her death poses no threat whatsoever to the general peace of the tribe or state. Rather, her death, “the consequences of a self-betraying submission to a dehumanizing world,” becomes only “an irremediable symptom of a society which has already disintegrated beyond anyone’s ability to piece it together.” As Essola himself points out, “Perpétue ne serait sans doute pas morte si ce maudit pays n’était totalement dépourvu de médicaments depuis l’avenement de Baba Toura” Professor S.H. Arnold has with great insight described this kind of writing as “Documentary-Historical Fiction,” and has shown how Beti leads us

to see beyond Essola's detective mission to view neocolonialism and backward traditions as powerful murderers of promising individuals like Perpétue.

In *The Grass is Singing* too, the schizophrenic disintegration of Mary Turner can best be understood only in the light of the Rhodesian setting with all its decadent pressures and social attitudes. Michael Thorpe is right in saying that the book "does not deal in ideologies, set black and white issues in opposition or make angry avowals of the author's distaste for white racism or her support for African self-determination," although these ideas could also be gleaned from the work. The crime of Mary's death was inconceivable outside the monotonous routine life of that small town colonial society of Rhodesia; it could not be divorced from the fact that they lived in a world where to be thirty, white and still unmarried was heresy; it was tied to a society in which to allow yourself to sink to the level of a nigger was the ultimate taboo. Michèle Wender Zak definitely understood the force of the social component in the novel when she said that, in it, Doris Lessing portrays "the dialectical relationship that Marxim insists always exists between the individual circumstances of one's life and the material nature of the social and economic systems within which one lives." Seen as a whole, Michael Thorpe has described it as an ironic, yet compassionate exposure of the fragility and futility of the myths upon which white settler society has sustained itself.

The real gravity of the issues at stake in *Xala* – the seizure of the property of the poor by the rich and the determination of the former to go to any extent to get even with the latter – would lose force outside the kind of setting provided for the story in Senegal where these particular beliefs and cultural values of the people are set against a callous group of *nouveaux riches*. And even here, the crucial point is not whether it is possible to use magical means to render a man impotent as the beggar is believed to have done, or whether the same means can be used to restore the potency. The emphasis is upon the widening gap between the two extremes of the society—the

rich and the poor. The tragedy of inflicting impotence on the rich man by the poor deprived beggar is only a *reduction and absurdum* of the theory of vengeance executed by the weak (poor, deprived or mistreated) against the fraudulent strong (rich, cruel or rapacious) as manifested in the other three novels. It is also Ousmane Sembè's attitude towards a theme which Austin Freeman tackled so well in Mr. Pottermack's Oversight, which Nicholas Blake tackled in *The Beast Must Die*, Agatha Christie in *Murder on the Orient Express*, Georgette Heyer in *Behold Here's Poison*, and Carter Dickon in *Plague Court Murders*. What Ousmane Sembene's beggar tells El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye at the climax of his discomfort could be taken as the accusation by all the poor and mistreated of all the rulers of society who have through ill-gotten gains become its gods:

Toute ta fortune passée...était batie sur la filouterie. Toi et tes collègues ne construisent que sur l'infortune des humbles et honnêtes gens. Pour vous donner une bonne conscience, vous créez des oeuvres de bienfaisance ou vous faites l'aumône aux coins des rues à des gens reduites à l'état de disgrâce. Et quand notre nombre est quantitativement genant, vous appelez votre police...

If Munira, Karega, Abdulla or Wanja said this to Chui, Mzigo, Kimeria, Nderi wa Riera, Rev. Jerrod Brown or any of the villains in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, we would not find it out of place, because as Bernth Lindors has remarked pertinently, "*Petals of Blood* is an original piece of fiction which addresses important social issues in a responsible fashion." The central crime in the book, the murder of the three leading industrialists, is shown by Ngugi to be the logical outcome of the kind of world which they have created for themselves. It is the offshoot of the nightmarish rapidity with which Ilmorog is made to rise from the obscurity of a desolate, blighted and unprogressive village to the eminence of a viable capitalist center,

plagued inevitably with all the intrigues of an exploiting upper class of politicians and businessmen.

The relationship between the writer and his society has been well discussed by Ngugi himself (1981:6-7):

A writer after all comes from a particular class and race and nation.... A writer is trying to persuade us, to make us view not only a certain kind of reality, but also from a certain angle of vision often, though perhaps unconsciously on behalf of a certain class, race, or nation.... Seen in this light, the product of a writer's pen both reflects reality and also attempts to persuade us to take a certain attitude to that reality. The persuasion can be a direct appeal on behalf of a writer's open doctrine or it can be an indirect appeal through 'influencing the imagination, feelings and actions of the recipient' in a certain way towards certain goals and set values, consciously or unconsciously held by him.

If we take this as an adequate justification for the preoccupation of these writers with socio-political issues, an even more difficult question remains; why they should mingle serious topical discussions with devices from such a disreputable genre as detective fiction. The answer is simply that, without the most exciting of entertainment elements carefully woven into the texture of their works, they would be nothing if not just outright sociological tracts. Despite the very effective use Ngugi has made of mingling sensationalism and serious complaint, he has been constantly accused of being too political. Bernth Lindfors thinks that "ngugi's techniques are far too bluntly didactic to be aesthetically pleasing, that politics impoverishes his art, ultimately rendering it nugatory;" Clifford Robson (1980:101) says: "in *Petals of Blood* Ngugi goes beyond what is acceptable in fiction; he is giving us polemic;" and Jurgen Martini (1982:10) says that this "admirable and significant novel is somewhat marred by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's tendency of forcing into the narrative texture of real historical events, situations and happenings which are not

imaginatively and organically integrated or incorporated into the narrative structure....” One can only guess what commentators would have said had he not attempted to make so much use of detective fiction techniques. But fortunately for Ngugi and the novel there have been many more comments on the positive side than the above criticisms, thanks to the detective novel devices which he employed to hold the reader’s attention to the end. It must be mentioned at this point that all these novels under discussion have been successful not in spite of but because of the presence of the elements of the detective story that have been incorporated in them.

The issue of employing various novelistic or artistic techniques in a single work of fiction has been a frequent topic of discussion in literary circles. Particularly illuminating in my view is that pursued by Joseph Blotner (1969:7) who states that:

Not only does the novelist have complete freedom in time and space, he has the right to use any of the devices found attractive in communication since the first articulate primate squatting in the firelight gave his interpretation of experience to his hairy brothers. The point of the story can be driven home or made more palatable with laughter, or suspense, or a cops-and-robbers-chase that will make it memorable...

The combination of techniques which we find in the four novels is therefore a measure of the consciousness of the writers as artists with a message that has to be put across in the best way possible.

Conclusion

Despite the prolificacy of detective fiction writers, and despite the phenomenal popularity of their works and their consequent financial successes, the highbrow circles of the intellectual world have not readily admitted such fiction into the fold of respectable literature. African writers, particularly those included here, seem to have achieved something that is immensely vital in the face of the general academic opinion of the genre as a tired and dying sub-art form. The novelists seem to be suggesting by the styles and structures they have adopted with such effectiveness, that one possible hope for detective fiction lies in choosing its most exciting elements and weaving them into the fabric of social, political or psychological novels.

It must be pointed out that although none of these writers has come out to propound any theory for combining the sublime with the ridiculous, their achievements in these works cannot be regarded as unconscious and fortuitous. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, to say nothing of other books, stands out as the strongest argument in the defence of this view. Any writer who is capable of beginning a novel with the sensations provoked by the first few pages of *Petals of Blood*, and who is capable of creating Inspector Godfrey for whom crime is like a jigsaw-puzzle, can certainly not be said to be unaware of some of the great writers of a now geriatric school: Agatha Christie, Georges Simenon and Erle Stanley Gardner. And any writer who is aware of these authors cannot fail to be aware and envious of their financial success, and so strive for it by emulating them faithfully. But if such a writer forgoes the financial attractions that go with constructing a novel mainly on sensational episodes the concatenation and deciphering of clues, and chooses to pad and crowd his work with psychological analysis of motives, historical, political, sociological and geographical data, it cannot be said that he is not consciously dealing out a lesson in technique to other writers.

Dostoevsky was after the same effect in *Crime and Punishment*, a novel filled with the paraphernalia of detective fiction, yet nobody who likes to be taken seriously has ever called the work detective fiction. The closest that a commentator has gone in associating it with “sub-literature” is Richard Peace’s description of its as “a psychological thriller.” Even in this single case, he redeems it when he defines his terms by saying that he means a thriller in which suspense is created not through the attempts to detect the culprit, but through the culprit’s own wayward efforts to resist detection. We could also describe these novels as psychological thrillers in which the suspense is created by a systematic but complicated exploration of motives (*Petals of Blood*). The impact of the crime on the investigator (Perpétue), the disintegration of the will to live (*The Grass is Singing*), and the will survive a physical deprivation (*Xala*). This may explain why when a critic like Bernth Lindfors describes Inspector Godfrey as An African Sherlock Holmes, it should be taken as a compliment to the range of technical devices employed by Ngugi rather than a derogatory remark.

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“From its very inception, detective fiction has enjoyed a great popularity among the young and the old, the learned and the not so learned. By some unfortunate stroke of irony, its respect has not kept pace with its enormous popularity. For over half a century now, it has remained the bane of creative writing. In strict intellectual circles, it is very rare to find people talk defensively and interestingly about the genre. Yet Asong has chosen to do just that! He has stoutly defended the weak by putting up a good case for its continued existence. He has also shown how irresistible key elements of the genre are to even the best respected novelists. Finally he has demonstrated for the first time, how the genre has been domesticated by African writers of very great repute such as Ngugi, Sembene and Lessing. That he has been able to prove that these writers have used techniques of detective fiction is a significant broadening of the horizons for appreciating creative writing in Africa. This, I think, is what real research is all about – endlessly exposing to the undiscerning readers new ways of looking at the old and familiar.”

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